

Russian ham operator Igor calls for help for his friend Oleg

**“If you take a midnight train, hurrying
to help a friend in January snow —
you were moved by a voice of conscience.
Therefore, you are still a human being.”**

*from “Understanding,”
a poem by Rudolf Harchenko*

A Lifeline for Oleg

It was early evening when Dr. Lionel (Len) Traubman received a telephone call that would change his life and that would ultimately save the life of a man he had never met. Traubman, a pediatric dentist in San Francisco, and an avid “ham” radio operator, had learned Russian in order to talk with other ham operators in the Soviet Union. So a message from Russia was not unusual. But this one was urgent: a plea from Igor Korolkov, a ham in the Soviet Union who was seeking American medical assistance for his critically injured friend, Oleg Murugov, also a ham operator.

Four days earlier, Oleg had been in an auto accident that had killed the man driving with him. Suffering from compressed skull, concussion, subdural hematoma, ruptured spleen, fractured shoulder blade and ribs, and in a deep coma, Oleg had barely clung to life in a rural clinic with no qualified doctor until Igor had (almost miraculously) convinced someone in the Soviet bureaucracy to provide a helicopter to evacuate him to a hospital in Ryazan.

There, surgery was performed on Oleg, but the outlook was grim. And so Igor sent out a call on the 20-meter ham radio band to America, seeking medical help. His message was



Ed Kritsky
New York

received by Ed Kritsky of Brooklyn, not a doctor but fluent in Russian. Kritsky phoned Traubman and Dr. Lawrence Probes, a Grand Rapids physician who also speaks some Russian.



Dr. Rita Shkolnik
California

Traubman translate the detailed medical terminology in the fax into English.

Traubman then phoned Dr. Joseph Izzo, a respected Bay Area neurosurgeon whom he had never met, told him of Oleg’s plight, and asked for his help. “He said yes,” Traubman recalled, “and he continued to help, night after night, week after week, for months.”

Dr. Izzo concluded that Oleg was lucky to be alive and that what happened over the coming two weeks would be



Dr. Lawrence Probes
Michigan

Kritsky also sent a fax, detailing Oleg’s condition in Russian. Two neighbors of the Traubmans, Dr. Rita Shkolnik, who had practiced medicine in the Soviet Union, and her husband, Alex, worked late into the night helping



Dr. Joseph Izzo, California

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Dr. Dragunkin with Oleg in Russian hospital

critical in determining whether or not he would recover. Traubman quickly organized a network of doctors and hams across the U.S. who, along with a similar network in Russia, became a lifeline for Oleg. Frequent communication was begun between Izzo and Traubman and the Russians, through Igor, with translating done by Kritsky in Brooklyn and Probes in Grand Rapids. In addition to ham radio, they utilized the PeaceNet electronic mail network. Soon telexes began arriving in English, as Igor diligently translated the messages to and from the doctors in Ryazan, with English language dictionaries at his side.

On Day 7, three days after Igor's initial call, Dr. Izzo replied to the Soviet doctors, advising them that Oleg was in a deep coma, that a CAT scan would be helpful to detect brain swelling, and that his head

should be kept elevated. Izzo prescribed specific drugs and dosages and suggested an airlift to a major medical center if possible (it wasn't). The Soviet doctors seemed at first to be suspicious of the advice from the American and hesitant to follow it, but soon they began to describe their observations and request further advice. Traubman described the change in the tone of their communications: "The relationship between the doctors in America and Russia started to change from one of mistrust and 'why are they doing this?' to cooperation, and as Oleg lay in bed near death, the doctors and nurses began to follow all the instructions."



Dr. Len Traubman
California

Dr. Traubman, an active volunteer in the Foundation for Global Community, has been interested in ham radio since his childhood during the early days of the Cold War. Though he left the airwaves after high school, he rekindled his old hobby 35 years later, "to test *glasnost*, to see what one individual might do to build bridges." To help Soviet and U.S. hams speak with each other, Traubman created a dialog guide, *Russian Phrases For Amateur Radio*, which was published in both languages and has sold more than 1000 copies around the world.

Traubman has told Oleg's story to the New York Academy of Sciences, radio communications organizations throughout the country, and to his own American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. As he describes it: "This is the story of the saving of one human life. But to me it is symbolic of what could be if we mobilized ourselves and our technology to save not just one human life, but many lives, and really all life on Earth. Not everyone has an Oleg to save, but everyone can be part of protecting our planet."

When Oleg developed pneumonia on Day 9, the Americans scrambled to find a broad spectrum antibiotic to treat it. Kritsky, in Brooklyn, managed to locate Angel Garcia, a hospital employee in New Jersey, who found the necessary medicine. Garcia then got it to Allen Singer, also of New Jersey, who drove the antibiotic out to JFK Airport to put on a plane to Moscow. At JFK, Singer encountered daunting lines and administrative details and nearly missed getting the package aboard. "Only at the last minute an air freight agent (Charles Mayer) was willing to overlook the red tape, picked up the drugs, ran them to the airplane, and put them through the door just as it was closing," Traubman recalled.



*Angel Garcia
New Jersey*



*Allen Singer
New Jersey*

The medicine reached the hospital in Ryazan the next day—after a friend of Oleg's, a fellow ham, drove all night to Moscow and back to retrieve it from the airport. Over the following several days, Oleg's pneumonia subsided, but his condition was still perilous, and Dr. Izzo remained in contact with the Russian doctors, suggesting adjustments in his drug regimens based on the descriptions sent over the telex.

As Oleg's condition gradually improved, the relationship grew between the Russians and Americans who had never met face to face. A message from Igor, expressing concern over Oleg's high heart rate and the quality of the tubes used for artificial

respiration, began, "Soviet doctors are very grateful for your assistance. Your advice gives them confidence that they are doing the right thing." Izzo responded, "Please tell the doctors we are thinking about them every minute. We feel a close kinship with them. And you, Igor, are doing a fantastic job!"

The tubes presented another challenge



*Dr. Charles Stark
New York*

for the Americans; Dr. Charles Starke of Briarcliff Manor, New York, heard the call for help and was able to locate better medical tubing and also a stronger antibiotic for Oleg. He got the items to Allen Singer, who

again sped them to JFK, this time getting them aboard the plane for Moscow without delay.

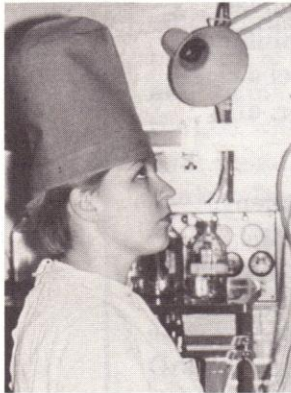
In his role as messenger between the Soviet and American doctors, Igor was of course privy to all information about the condition of his friend. Worried by discussions about the possibility of cardiac arrest, Igor asked Dr. Izzo, "Doc, you said it is doubtful to save my friend if there is a cardiac arrest. But have our doctors a chance to save him a life if no cardiac arrest will be?"

To which Izzo replied, "Yes, there is a chance to save Oleg's life. It is difficult to say at this time about the 'quality' of that life." The telex from Izzo and Traubman that night concluded, "We are proud to work with you. This is a new moment on Earth. Everything we do breathes new life into our relationship and, hopefully, into our brother, Oleg."

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Encouraging news came over the telex the following day (Day 14): "The patient have begun to open eyes, move his hands, have tried to fix the look and to carry out the commands. Soviet doctors with your help believe in success." Traubman recalled the sense of relief and rejoicing that night: "I could hardly see my control panel through the tears."

During the next several weeks, Oleg gradually came out of his coma. He was able to respond to questions by squeezing "yes" with his left hand, although still paralyzed on his right side.



Russian medical staff keep a vigilant watch

The communications over shortwave and telex remained urgent, and Oleg was far from being out of the woods, but occasional notes of humor broke some of the tension. On Day 16, for example, came the message: "Oleg passes a stool independently. We celebrate!"

By Day 23, Oleg had begun moving his right extremities. During this stage of Oleg's recovery, Izzo constantly encouraged the Soviet medical staff to get Oleg up and about as much as possible. Traubman pointed out the differences in the approaches taken by Soviet and American doctors: "(Izzo said) 'Stimulate him! Get him out of bed as much as possible. He'll be tired. That's okay! Shake him! Talk to him!' . . . They were very hesitant to get him out of bed, to move him, to walk him. That is not their way. They baby them, they do not know how to help patients like this recover because most of them do not get this far."

But the Soviet doctors did heed the advice given them by the American, and Oleg's condition continued to improve. Day 31: He is sitting up in bed and able to swallow water. Day 35: Intravenous feeding has stopped. Oleg is fed through a tube a broth made for him by his mother. Day 38: He is plugging his trachial tube to facilitate speech; some of the first words spoken are profane complaints about the terrible bedsores he has developed.

Traubman, Dr. Izzo, Ed Kritsky and others across the U.S. kept their vigil in the ensuing weeks, following Oleg's progress through Igor's frequent communications. By Day 60, Oleg's bedsores were healing, he was eating by mouth, walking at least twice a day and maintaining conversations with visitors.

Then, a week later, there were two setbacks: Oleg's pneumonia and fever returned, and Dr. Izzo underwent emergency surgery for carotid artery stenosis. But within three days, Izzo was again advising the Russian doctors, even as he himself was recovering. He recommended continuation of Oleg's antibiotic. Soon the pneumonia disappeared, and Oleg was gaining strength.

On Day 80 came the moment of elation: Igor contacted the Americans on the ham radio with the message, "Oleg is home." He had made a surprisingly fast recovery and travelled home by train the previous day. He was met at the station by his friends and family, who took him to his home and threw him a great party. Across the world, Oleg's American brothers celebrated for him as well.



Oleg at home today

Traubman says, "I will never forget the year 1990. It's the year that the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union finally ended. Walls fell, democracies sprang up, new partnerships began, and the evolution of the human spirit of cooperation continued to flower and spread around the planet. And Oleg went home."

Ted Daley

Ted Daley received his M.B.A. degree from Stanford University last June. He wrote this story for Timeline before departing for New Zealand to take a management position.



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Judy!

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